DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 649 CS 505 134

AUTHOR Gillespie, Patti P.
TITLE Theatre as Political Statement.
PUB DATE 31 Mar 85
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiences; *Drama; *Dramatics; *High Schools; Influences; Political Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *International Thespian Society

ABSTRACT

To determine what the plays that high school theater groups produce teach audiences about politics, a study was conducted in which surveys of members of the International Thespian Society were examined and a list of the twenty plays most often produced since World War II was compiled. Analysis of the most popular plays reveals that they portray a world populated primarily by white, middle-aged, middle class Americans. American drama is the only drama represented. Only plays from the past are popular, and only successful Broadway plays or adaptations of popular novels or films are represented. Therefore, students, the audiences for these plays, might well conclude that the part of the world that truly matters is a Christian, white, middle-class, small-town world where free enterprise, self-fulfillment, and patriarchy are the accepted principles. Worst of all, students might feel that drama is trivial, with no connection to their own lives. Directors of high school productions must begin to select plays that not only provide entertainment but also stimulate students' interest and cause them to examine their lives and the world around them. (DF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED263649

THEATRE AS POLITICAL STATEMENT

Patti P. Gillespie
University of Maryland
March 31, 1985

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Patti P. Gillespie

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 505 134

Theatre as Political Statement

Dramatic theorists through the centuries have told us that the purpose of drama is to teach and to please. Related but separable from this view of drama as an intentionally didactic instrument is another -- that drama cannot help but teach, that, regardless of drama's goal, it will inevitably teach something. It is of course this position that Plato assumed in his Republic when he banished poets from his ideal state, and it is this position on which most rational arguments for censorship have been based, including current complaints about the effects of television programming on children. It is this position, too, that leads to the conclusion that all drama is political because it inevitably either affirms or questions values, beliefs, and action. This view, held intermittently since Plato's time, has gained renewed attention in this century with Marxist critics and, even more recently, with advocates of black and feminist aesthetics.

This renewed attention has been quite productive, for it has helped critics see plays from a different point of view, and it has illuminated aspects of our current practice, throwing them into relief so that we may look at them in a somewhat different light. I propose, therefore, to adopt for the purposes of this study the view that drama cannot help but teach. What, then, is it teaching? What political statement does it make?

Of several groups about which this question might be productively asked, I chose to focus on high school students for three reasons: first, such students are still developing their views and values and are therefore perhaps more susceptible to politicization than are college students or the general public; second, many such students, though by no means all, have regular opportunities to watch and participate in plays at their school, whereas elementary school students do not; and third, a better collection of data exists for the high school group than for either elementary or college students. Because it can be shown that drama programs in both high schools and colleges changed after World War II, I have further limited the data for this study to the post-war years 1945-1984.

The International Thespian Society is the largest, strongest, and most visible of the national drama groups representing high schools. [1] Each year the Thespians survey their members and compile a list of that year's most frequently produced plays. Using these annual lists, I determined the twenty plays most often produced since World War II. I then examined these twenty plays for the implicit and explicit messages that they held, the political statements that they made. Three cautionary notes about the data: not all high schools that produce plays belong to the Thespian Society; not all Thespian schools return the annual surveys; and data are unavailable for 1955.[2] Nevertheless, these data, however imperfect, are the best available, and they can be considered indicative, if not

definitive, of practices in high school drama programs in the United States.

What political statements have we been making to our high school students through drama since World War II? The answer to this question is perhaps best approached through the answers to two subsidiary questions: What is the world represented in this drama, and what are the inferences that may be reasonably drawn from this world? Once answered, these questions may lead us to speculate about the impact of high school drama on ourselves and our students.

The top twenty plays, listed in Table I, are mostly comedies (8) and musicals (7), with only four serious plays and a single mystery among them.[3] Of the top five plays, four are comedies, You Can't Take It With You, Arsenic and Old Lace, Harvey, and The Curious Savage; and all tell the stories of loveable, middle-aged eccentrics who, although badly treated by the outside world, triumph at the play's end. The four are obviously comedies of sentiment rather than wit, and all four require most of the actors to portray older adults; in each there is a secondary action revolving around young people in love, but even these lovers are well out of their teen years. Only two musicals appear among the top ten plays, Oklahoma and The Music Man, but three of the four serious pieces appear there: Our Town, The Miracle Worker, and The Diary of Anne Frank. Unlike the comedies and musicals, these serious plays do offer significant roles for adolescents, though even here the majority of the long roles are for older people. Except for You're A Good

TABLE ONE: TOP TWENTY PLAYS, 1945-1984

TITLE	Years on List	Year Written	First Year
You Can't Take It With You	39	1936	1945
Our Town	37	1938	1947
Arsenic and Old Lace	36	1941	1945
Harvey	29	1944	1954
The Curious Savage	28	1950	1951
Oklahoma	22	1943	1961
The Diary of Anne Frank	21	1955	1960
The Miracle Worker	21	1959	1963
Our Hearts Were Young and Gay	20	1946	1947
The Night of January 16th	20	1935	1947
The Music Man	20	1957	1963
Bye, Bye Birdie	18	1960	1963
The Man Who Came to Dinner	16	1939	1946
The Sound of Music	12	1959	1965
Up The Down Staircase	12	1969	1970
You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown	12	1967	1972
Guys and Dolls	11	1950	1971
Godspell	10	1971	1975
Teahouse of the August Moon	8	1953	1960
The Crucible	8	1953	1964

Data for 1955 are unavailable. Thirty-nine years, then, is the longest any play could appear on lists in this study. First year refers to the year of the study during which the play first made a top 20 list.

Man, Charlie Brown, the plays on the list have unusally large casts when judged by the standards of today's commercial theatre.

Almost all of the non-musical plays adopt the theatrical conventions of realism; the three atypical plays in this regard are Our Town, The Night of January 16, and The Teahouse of the August Moon, each of which makes open acknowledgement of the theatrical audience, even bringing it into the action upon occasion. The musicals predictably romanticize their realism, with both Godspell and You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown moving outside of the style altogether.

An analysis of the plays shows that the world of this drama is populated overwhelmingly by white Americans who are mostly middle-aged and middle class. Only about 1% of the characters are black; of these, most are domestic servants, with the remainder either children's companions or students. They speak a broadly comic perversion of English, and some are the butt of jokes about welfare fraud and illegitimate relationships. For example, in You Can't Take It With You, Donald, the Sycamore's handyman and black Rheba's live-in lover, offers his opinion of the United States' government: "I'm on relief, you know. . . . Yassuh it's fine. Only thing is you got to go round to the place every week and collect it, and sometimes you got to stand in line for pretty near half an hour. Government ought to be run better than that -- don't you think?" White Americans of other ethnic backgrounds make up another 1% and are also recognized by their odd accents or exotic behavior. About 6% of the characters are foreigners, but almost all of these are white.

The only non-white foreigners come from Teahouse of the August Moon, a play set in the Pacific islands just after World War II, which shows American soldiers trying to cope with a romanticized native culture. The only play that seems to display a multi-cultural world is Up The Down Staircase, where the different ethnic backgrounds of the students are a major point.

Young people are seldom central in this world, and their actions usually revolve solely around dating or growing up. Only a few of the plays take as their major interest the trials of adolescence, though several others touch on such matters incidentally.[3] Whichever the approach, the issues deal with relationships rather than with ideas, actions, or consequences. The sign of adulthood seems to be a proposal of marriage. For example, George and Emily of Our Town come of age one afternoon, sitting at the soda fountain of the local drugstore. George begins: "Emily, I'm going to tell you why I'm not going to Agriculturaal [sic] School. I think once you've found a person you're very fond of -- I mean a person who's fond of you, too, and who likes you well enough to be interested in your character -- Well, I think that's just as important as college is, and even more so. That's what I think." To which Emily quietly assents. In the next scene, they marry in the church and take their roles as adults in Grover's Corners.

The world of the twenty plays is very much a world where material comforts are important, but it is also a world in which these material comforts are taken for granted. Those characters who work have few difficulties with money; those who do not work

do not seem to need to work in order to survive. Indeed, the attitude toward work that emerges from the plays is ambiguous. Several sympathetic characters, like Grandpa in You Can't Take It With You and Elwood P. Dowd in Harvey, have decided to retire; other sympathetic characters, like Mrs. Savage in The Curious Savage and the Brewster sisters in Arsenic and Old Lace, make clear that they do not have to work. Teachers are shown at work in The Miracle Worker and Up the Down Staircase, and con men at work in The Music Man and Guys in Dolls, but in general the plays assume a fairly high standard of living without much attention to its source.

The scenic environments of the plays reinforce the social reality of the characters. The action of all but five unfolds in the United States, either in greater New York City or in some small town in the midwest, south, or northeast. Of those plays set outside the U.S., three deal with some facet of the Second World War, showing, on the one hand, Europeans trying to escape Nazis and, on the other, American soldiers occupying recently liberated islands. Almost all except the musicals take place in and around the homes of the major characters. In several of the most popular plays, this home (usually its living room) is depicted as a kind of sanctuary, a world set apart and protected from the world at large. The most literal sanctuary is, of course, in The Diary of Anne Frank, where the cramped, hidden attic protects the Franks and their friends from capture and perhaps death. Another kind of sanctuary is implicit in many of the comedies, however, where the home is depicted as a place

where the family and its eccentricities are enshrined and compared favorably with the so-called normal world that surrounds it. This notion of sanctuary is probably clearest in The Curious Savage, where the newly formed family of inmates in the public room of the asylum contrasts sharply with the grasping blood relatives who live outside the asylum. An American school (Up the Down Staircase) and an American courtroom (The Night of January 16) join the home as environments for the non-musical plays.

The musicals, in keeping with their usual conventions, take place in a variety of settings, without regard for the illusion of reality. Their settings are accordingly more diverse, from Oklahoma's ranches to Iowa's band halls, to New York city's clubs and crap games. And within each musical there are several locations, indoors as well as out. For example, in Oklahoma, the action cuts among the front of one farmhouse, the back of another, a smokehouse, a porch; and in The Sound of Music, the action shifts among Austrian mountains, convents, and houses.

Most of the plays unfold in times contemporary with that of the writing. The exceptions are easily explained: Six plays are loosely historical and so transpire at the time of the supposed event; of these, however, Arthur Miller's The Crucible probably treats a contemporaneous event -- the McCarthy persecutions. Three other plays --Our Town, Oklahoma, The Music Man--seem to choose the preceding generation as a way of distancing the action and promoting the notion of the past "good

old days," days well described by Mr. Webb in Our Town: "All males vote at the age of 21. Women vote indirect. We're lower middle-class: sprinklin' of professional men--10% illiterate laborers. Politically, we're 86% Republicans; 6% Democrats; 4% Socialists; Rest, indifferent. Religiously, we're 85% Protestants; 12% Catholics; Rest, indifferent. . . our young people here seem to like it well enough; 90% of them graduating from high school settle down right here to live--even when they've been away to college." The actions of only Godspell and The Crucible unfold before the 20th century.

Although the twenty plays embrace without question the American system of government and business, the home and family are the plays' focus, the institutions around which most of the plays unfold. The values are Christian and patriarchal. Women's primary interests are her home and family. If she works outside the home, she does not have a career but a female job -- secretary, teacher, librarian, missionary. If she is a girl or an unmarried woman, her interest is in finding a boyfriend or husband. Boys are in law school or medical school or are otherwise preparing to do something. Men display the full range of jobs: soldier, car salesman, prophet, petty crook, teacher, rock star, cowboy, reporter. Man's preeminence outside the home is unquestioned, and even in the home he is clearly -- if often foolishly -- in charge. Men know best; they are able to talk directly to God as his equal. In You Can't Take It With You, Grandpa taps his plate for quiet and begins the grace: "Well, Sir, here we are again. "

The major recurrent theme is the folly of preferring money to family. Those individuals are happiest who uphold the values of simple living in the face of social pressures to make money or to conform. Indeed, four of the five top plays revolve around genial eccentrics who have withdrawn from society's pressures in order to reassert the primacy of family and home over wealth and possessions. In some plays, this conflict between human relationships and financial success is part of a larger contrast between the older rural values and the newer urban ones. Without exception, the plots favor the old virtues: when Conrad Birdie, the famous rock star, comes to Ohio, Ohio wins; when rural Oklahomans want to call up images of sin, they mention Kansas City. The pursuit of money is associated with bureaucratic bungling or unimaginative living and is generally regarded as pernicious. Thus, the Kirbys in <u>You Can't Take It With You,</u> the Savages in <u>The Curious Savage</u>, and the gamblers in <u>Guys and Dolls</u> are ridiculed and finally defeated by a competing set of values, the values of family, home, and stability.

Just as rural values are affirmed over urban ones, stasis is embraced over change. <u>Our Town</u> probably expresses it best when the Stage Manager observes: "This time nine years have gone by.. . . . Gradual changes in Grover's Corners. Horses are gettin' rarer. Farmers coming into town now in Fords. Everybody locks their house doors now at night. Ain't been any burglars in town yet, but everybody's heard about 'em. You'd be surprised though -- on the whole, things don't change much around here." The same point is made less overtly in most other plays on the

list: in Arsenic and Old Lace, the pattern of comic killings threatens to continue uninterrupted at the play's end; in Harvey, Elwood P. Dowd and his six-foot white rabbit have beaten back the threat of modern medical science; in The Music Man, the flim flam artist falls in love, stops travelling , and prepares to settle down in the middle of Iowa; and in Guys and Dolls, the city gambler is tamed and married by the small-town missionary, to offer only a few examples. Even in the plays set outside the United States, these same values show through. Anne Frank sounds like a character from an American musical with her famous closing line, as she is preparing to submit to Nazi capture and a sure trip to the concentration camps: "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."

It is probably well to stress that these values are most often implicit, rather than explicit; they are displayed rather than discussed in the plays. Indeed, it could be argued that only one or two of the plays (The Crucible and perhaps Godspell) treat seriously any issues that have public rather than domestic consequences. Obviously, Our Town, The Miracle Worker, and The Diary of Anne Frank are serious as opposed to humorous, but their emphasis remains on relationships rather than issues, on sentiment rather than thought.

One of the top twenty, The Night of January 16, is an interesting sport. In its original version , written by philosopher Ayn Rand, the play was a serious attempt to pit two lifestyles, two sets of values, against one another. The play's murder was simply, according to Rand, a convenient vehicle for

this philosophical exploration. But the original was severely bowdlerized for its commericial showing on Broadway, becoming, according to Rand, "an incongruous mongrel slap dashed out of contradictory elements." From this mongrel version yet another, more sanitized one was prepared specifically for the high-school market. About this amateur version, Rand said: "[It] is not written by me and is not a part of my works."[4] The Night of January 16 in its high school version is simply a courtroom thriller, the trial of a murderess whose guilt or innocence will be decided at the play's end by a vote of the theatre audience. Although in Ayn Rand's original version the verdict served to affirm one or another life style, in the high school version no such idea squeaks through. It is perhaps telling that the single play on the list that set out seriously to address a conflict of basic values was stripped down for high school production until no such conflict of ideas was detectable.

An analysis of the list as well as of the individual plays is also revealing. First, in utter disproportion to either its volume or quality in the world, American drama is the only drama represented. Second, from among the available American repertory, which is itself very limited, only plays from the past are popular. Sixteen of the twenty plays were written before 1960; eight were written before 1950; only one was written after 1970. Third, from this exceedingly limited repertory, only successful Broadway plays or adaptations of popular novels and films are represented; that is, only those works initially aimed at a mass audience and already proved successful with that

audience appear on the list. Unhappily, this already limited range of plays seems to be further constricting, for teachers appear increasingly disinclined to stray from the list of proven hits. For example, since 1970, sixteen of the decades' top twenty plays appeared on the final list, whereas from 1945-1960 only six to ten did. Some teachers and scholars suggest that this increasing reliance on a few proven plays reflects the unhappy state of today's Broadway, where shows with rather different values are now regularly produced.

What might normal high school students infer about the nature of things, given this repertory? They would of course respond not only to what was said directly but also to what was shown or implied; that is, they would see how the world was defined and what issues in it were considered worthy of portrayal, as well as what was said about any specific issue. From the evidence, their conclusion might reasonably be that the world that exists -- or at least the world that matters -- is a Christian, white, middle-class, small-town world of few questions, easy answers, and little change. They might reasonably infer that free enterprise, self-fulfillment, and patriarchy are universally accepted principles. They might reasonably infer that there are few alternatives to this way of life and that those that exist are invariably inferior, even laughable. They might reasonably infer that the world is simple and benign, that people are basically good, and that ideas are unimportant. They most probably would infer that drama is utterly trivial, that it has no connection with their own

concerns, and that it is barren of ideas. They most certainly would infer that the purpose of drama is to entertain rather than challenge. The smarter among them would perhaps conclude that drama differs little from television.

Given the evidence of the plays, these inferences are entirely plausible. They are nevertheless depressingly wrong, because so laughably incomplete. The world in which today's high school students are to live is not, in fact, mostly white, Christian, middle-aged, or middle class. Values like rugged individualism, patriarchy, racism, and capitalism are no longer passing unchallenged. Change is swift, answers complex, and questions common. Rapid communication has made alternative religions, cultures, and lifestyles more accessible than ever before, and a series of revolutions and wars have brought to the United States an extraordinary array of ethnic groups, each with its own beliefs and values. The world of today's high school students is about change not stasis, about alternatives not absolutes. To the degree that high school drama persists in acknowledging only the traditional values of a parochial world, to that degree it will be perceived as irrelevant and trivial, nothing more than a convivial version of prime-time television.

But drama is not by its nature either banal or mindless. Indeed, history shows that drama can be a powerful agent for learning and for change. It can be intellectually rigorous, emotionally satisfying, culturally enriching, and politically powerful. With conflict at its core, drama is especially suited for pitting competing ideas against one another and exploring the

results. Because of drama's aesthetic nature, the audience can participate in outrageous ideas, threatening decisions, and dangerous actions while remaining safe from any real consequences. Indeed, given drama's ability to explore alternatives safely, and education's mandate to consider and evaluate alternatives, one might suppose that drama would be an important part of the education of secondary school students. Clearly, such is not the case. Instead of being treated as an important part of the students' education, drama is being offered as an entertainment: it is "reassuring" students rather than "raising doubt" in them, to paraphrase John Whiting.

Perhaps our discovery of the political messages implicit in our high school plays is reason enough to reconsider not only the repertory but also the purpose for which we include the production of plays at the high school level. If our purpose is no more than entertainment, then might we not better spend both the students' and our own time? If our purpose is educational, in the deep sense of that word, then we should come to terms with the relationship between education and discomfort and begin to devise a repertory for high-school productions that can better help us reach our goal.

Endnotes

[1] Doug Finney, the group's executive secretary, estimates membership at between 2500 and 3000, with especially heavy participation in Florida and somewhat light affiliation in the Northeast. He identified no particular pattern in the kinds of schools that affiliate, though he noted that some large urban high schools often could not participate because of laws against fraternal organizations. He characterized the "typical" member school as probably white, middle-class, and drawn from communities whose population hovers at about 30,000.

[2] According to Finney, about 20% of all high schools affiliate; of the remaining 80%, the number that regularly produces plays is unknown. The rate of return varies radically from year to year, with 50% considered very good. The issue from 1955 exists neither in the Library of Congress or in the national office, whose recent fire may have destroyed the relevant materials.

[3] All plays are in print and can be purchased from the appropriate publisher. The libretto of Godspell is not separately published.

[4] Rand's comments are a part of the introductory matter to her original script (only slightly revised for publication), published in 1961.

[5] As quoted in Walter J. Meserve, An Outline History of American Drama (Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1965), p. 347.